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In Memoriam

Giorgio Filippi, April 4, 1935–January 19, 1996

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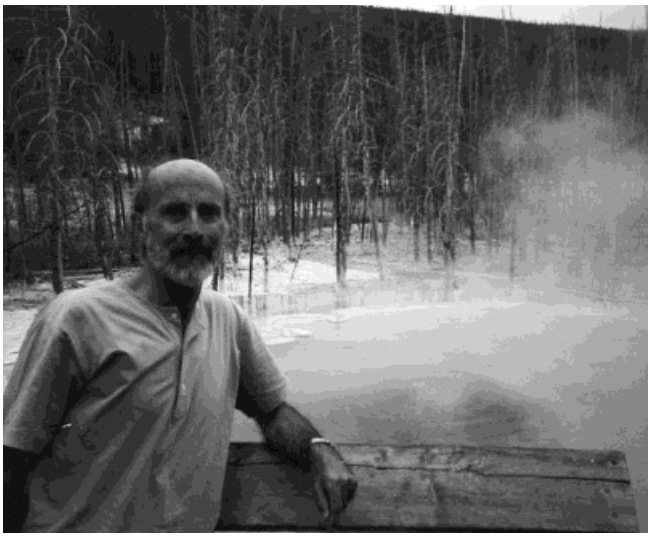

It is with gratitude and yet deep sadness that I accepted John Opitz's invitation to write an obituary for my closest collaborator and dearest friend, Giorgio Filippi, who died of cancer in his home at Trieste, Italy, last January 19 at the age of 61, tenderly cared for by his dear wife Fortunata and daughter Laura.

Giorgio graduated cum laude in medicine at the University of Rome in the late 1950s and specialized in pediatrics at the same university in the early 1960s. After a postdoctoral stage in Bruxelles, Belgium, where he was introduced to the biochemistry of human diseases, he won a tenured and well-paid position in the Italian National Health Service. However, before moving to the new assignment, he decided to respond to an advertisement circulated by the Genetics Department of the University of Rome (directed at the time by the late Prof. Giuseppe Montalenti, founder of the first institute of genetics in Italy and the beloved mentor of a large number of Italian geneticists, including Giorgio and myself) offering a modestly remunerated 3-year research contract to an established pediatrician prepared to participate actively in a NSF-sponsored research project on human population genetics in the island of Sardinia. In Montalenti's group, I had the responsibility of coordinating these population studies, and it was my task to explain to the applicants the very demanding nature of the job. At the time I had already moved to the University of Leiden, and it was an urgent matter to place the Sardinian project in the right hands. For this reason, in the winter of 1963, I met with Giorgio repeatedly in Rome and in Sardinia to support him in his difficult decision to give up a secure future in the medical profession for what was no more than an attempt to enter the challenging, albeit at the time still obscure world of human genetic research.

Actually—he told me sometime after—what made him decide to accept the offer without hesitation was the attractive change of perspective that the new task implied: to go hunting for disease in populations rather than being called to the bedside of individual patients! He had evidently a built-in attraction to medical genetics. Thus it is no wonder that in 1967 he joined Victor McKusick for 2 years of advanced training in medical genetics at the Moore Clinic of the Johns Hopkins University Hospital, at the time the undisputed Mecca of the "trade." It was indeed there that Giorgio gained international recognition as medical genetist as witnessed by the large number of entries with his name in McKusick's catalog on "Human Inheritance in Man," which include the listing of a "Filippi syndrome."

After his return to Italy, he established himself in the Department of Genetics at the University of Cagliari, Sardinia, where he remained until 1973, first as senior scientist of the Italian National Research Council and then as Associate Professor of Genetics. His appointment to the chair of medical genetics at the University of Trieste in 1973 (a position he held at the time of his death) made no change in his lifelong habit of dedicating at least 2 months per year to our collaborative research program of human population genetics in Sardinia. This collaboration went on unabated for over 30 years until the very end of his life.

Giorgio's personal contribution to these studies was concentrated on the use of the G6PD polymorphism as a research tool in X-chromosome biology, such as X-inactivation mosaicism, X-chromosome nondisjunction, and on the linkage analysis between the G6PD locus and a large number of X-linked traits or diseases. It would be embarrassing for me, as group leader, to emphasize here the generally acknowledged significance of these studies, but I have no hesitation to state that none of the work done by our group in Sardinia on human population and medical genetics would have been

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possible without Giorgio's enthusiastic leadership and indefatigable drive. The secret of his success in handling these population and pedigree studies is that he was literally loved by his patients and their families for the care and respect he showed them during the data collection and throughout the years afterward.

When my own scientific interests diverted toward somatic cell genetics and molecular biology (after my move from Leiden to New York), my personal contribution to the Sardinian project suffered a standstill, and this led to the accumulation of incomplete research endeavors that Giorgio amiably called "the unfinished symphonies." When he called to give me the dreadful news of his fatal disease, he cheered me up with his ironic comment "now there is no way out, Marcello, we have to get together and finish at least some of those symphonies." Three of them were indeed finished and are now in press in the *American Journal of Medical Genetics*, one of the genetic journals Giorgio favored for its editorial policy of considering the reports of data on clinical semeiology as important as those on biochemical and molecular phenotyping.

At our last encounter, a week before the end, he was feeble in body but as strong as ever in mind and spirit. Our discussion had fallen again on the unfinished work; but—as I was leaving—he gave me a long meaningful handshake and said with a soft voice and his usual affectionate smile: "By the way, I never thanked you officially for having helped me to give up medicine for genetics, but you know that I never actually stopped from being primarily a physician. I consider myself lucky to have had such a happy life at home and at work. In particular I thank you for all you did to make me learn genetics." I smiled back, pretending the same peacefulness of mind but had to leave in a rush not to succumb to emotion. I very much regret now to have been unable to express to him "officially" my own and everybody's deep gratitude for the critical role he played to support the scientific achievements of the entire group but, especially, for the last unspoken lesson on courage and dignity that he taught us all throughout the long ordeal of his lost battle for life.

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